

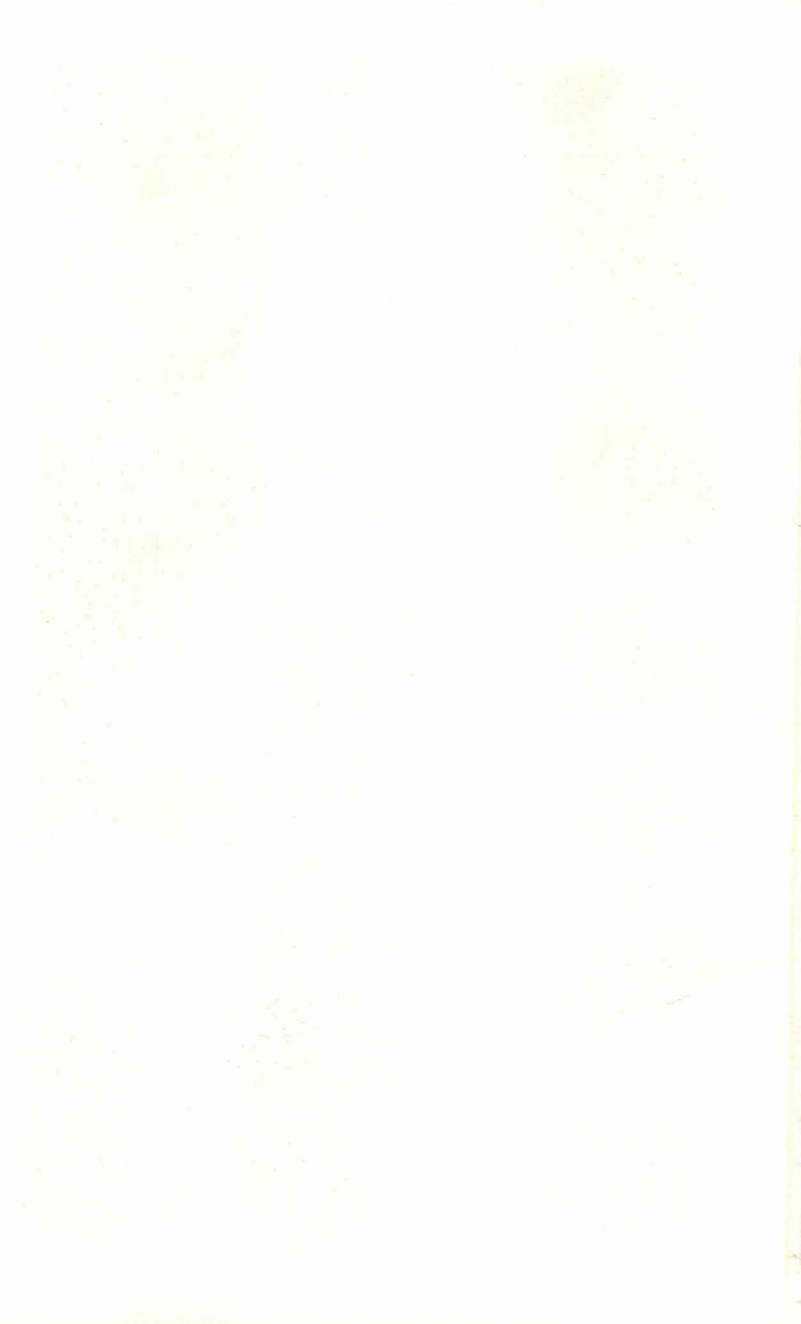
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NOT FOR RESALE

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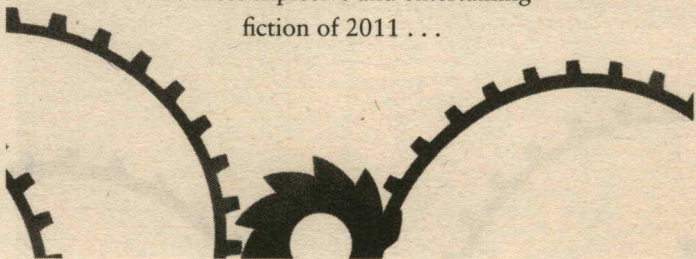


What do Drew, Marcus,
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have in common?

They're the next generation
of boy-book rebels in five of
Puffin's 2011 blockbusters.

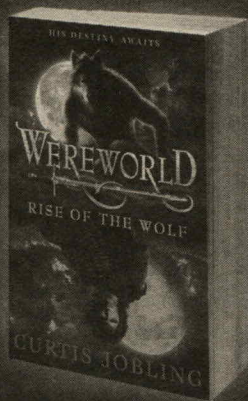
From the Roman Empire and an American high school to the most godforsaken parts of a land called Lyssia, you can join them on their epic journeys. Whether you're into high-adrenalin action adventure, the paranormal, fantasy or all of the above, you're guaranteed to find an unforgettable read right here with a range of exciting extracts.

Lose yourself for a few hours in some of
the most explosive and entertaining
fiction of 2011 . . .



WEREWORLD

RISE OF THE WOLF



*'You are the last of the Werewolves.
Don't fight it, son; embrace it. Conquer it.'*

When the air is clear, sixteen-year-old Drew Ferran can pick up the scent of a predator. When the moon breaks through the clouds, a terrifying fever grips him.

And when a vicious beast invades his home, his flesh tears, his fingers become claws and Drew transforms . . .

Forced to flee the family he loves, Drew seeks refuge in the most godforsaken parts of Lyssia. But when he is captured by Lord Bergan's men, Drew must prove he is not the enemy.

*Can Drew battle the werecreatures determined
to destroy him - and master the animal within?*

WEREWORLD

Chapter 3 *The Visitor*

The storm raged with a renewed fury, bellowing in the sky over the tiny farmhouse. As the curtains whipped about, caught and torn on crooked shards of broken glass, wind roared in through the gaping chasm of the demolished window.

Turning his back into the glass while dropping to the ground, Drew had sheltered his mother from the explosion as best as he could.

'Are you all right?' he called over the din.

His mother nodded quickly, eyes shooting towards the window. She looked shaken and scared, but beyond some scratches on her face seemed unharmed. Drew slowly helped her to her feet, surveying the situation.

The great bay window now blanketed the floor with hundreds of tiny pieces of splintered wood and shattered glass. The odd piece of timber swung from its brackets attached to the window frame, broken and ruined. The bookcase that had flanked the window lay on its side, empty and smashed, its far-flung books flapping as the wind clutched at their pages. Rain continued to drive into the room, harsh cold spittle that spattered Drew's face.

Helping his mother back into her chair he began to step over the damaged furniture, making his way towards the window. The fallen bookcase would be best put to use as a temporary hoarding over the hole until the morning came. He'd have to dig out his pa's toolbox from the cellar, but once his father and brother returned they could all set about putting things back to normal. Still, the situation unnerved him.

Curtis Jobling

His eyes searched the room, an important piece of the puzzle missing. The hairs on the back of his neck trembled, a shiver still coursing down his body and making his whole frame tremble. Something wasn't right. Squinting into the darkness, Drew couldn't see what had caused the impact. He had expected to find a great tree branch jutting into the house, but the lack of any obvious cause both surprised and worried him. Surely the wind alone couldn't cause such damage? He took a further step towards the window, still searching for evidence. The fire roared against the storm before suddenly giving up the ghost, chased from the room.

Then it appeared.

The shadow seemed to build from the floor upwards, a low murky shape that stood out from the darkness with a definition all of its own. Drew staggered back. As it rose, first to the height of Drew's waist and then taller, it seemed to grow outwards at the same time, filling the gaping hole that had once been the bay window. Drew stumbled, the strength in his legs failing him, almost losing his footing as he backed up. Wood and glass clattered to the floor around the creature as the remains of the window fell from its frame.

Outside the lightning flashed, adding a brief glimpse of illumination to the scene. Upon seeing the beast, Drew's first thought was that it was a bear of some kind, but who had ever heard of a bear being bold enough to walk up to a farmhouse, let alone leaping through its windows? It quickly became clear that the creature was far removed from anything that he'd ever seen, sharing little in common with the animals that inhabited the Cold Coast.

A thick coat of oily black hair covered its heavy frame, a foul-stinking pelt that bristled with muddy rainwater. Heavy forelimbs swung down from its hunched

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shoulders, viciously clawed hands scraping the splintered floorboards around it. Smaller legs were bent double below, supporting the body above, threatening to spring the great mass forward at any moment in a mighty bound. What appeared to be a long fleshy tail wound out from the base of its torso, snaking back through the rubble towards the window. It stood some eight feet tall in all, dominating the darkness of the room.

Whatever horror the body of the beast had created in Drew and his mother paled in comparison when the fearsome head rose slowly from the black nest of fur on its chest. The long snout came into view, tapering towards the end where a cluster of long, sharp teeth jutted out from curling blood-red lips. Its breath rolled into the room before it, making Drew gag at the stench. The foul air carried the scent of rotting flesh and disease, the stink of death and decay, sweet and sickening. Its ears were small and pinned back to its head, almost hidden among the glistening dark coat. Two pale red eyes flashed from pitch-black sockets, narrowing with wicked glee as it stared back at its prey.

It opened its mouth wide, throwing its head back as it bared its teeth, a long black tongue lolling and snaking from its maw as saliva spattered down to pool with the rainwater.

Drew's stomach was in turmoil as he stared at the monster. His heart raced, the burn of the fever still gripping his body but now fuelling something, feeding his will. Spurred into activity, he leapt to the fireplace between the beast and his mother, reaching up and unclipping his father's Wolfshead blade from the chimney breast. It felt heavy and awkward in his hands, but he held it wavering before him, palms gripping the hilt of the sword. He felt his mother's trembling hand on his shoulder, her fear passing over him as she stood up to shelter behind him.

The creature seemed to chortle, loud, low and guttural,

Curtis Jobling

as it clambered over the overturned furniture and further into the room.

'Get out!' cried Drew over the wail of the wind, swinging the sword before him to try to ward it off. The beast raised a hand, batting the sword aside, stepping ever closer. Drew's bones and muscles burned, a sudden sharp pain racing wildly through his body to clench his heart. Losing control he lashed out with the sword, lunging towards the monster blade-point first. The sword disappeared beneath its arm, hitting home somewhere in the monster's midriff. It recoiled, staggering. Lowering a clawed hand to its bloodied side, it examined the dark black liquid with no small degree of concern, before glaring back at its attacker. A huge hairy arm scythed out, quick as a flash, arcing across the room to tear Drew's chest. Blood flew from a trio of razor-sharp cuts as Drew collapsed against his mother, the sword tumbling from his grasp with a clatter on to the floorboards.

'Drew!' called his mother, but the cry was in vain.

His body shook violently, picking an unfortunate moment to seemingly give up its battle against the fever that had haunted him. Tilly Ferran let out a scream of despair as her son tumbled from her arms to the hearth, his poor body convulsing. She snatched up the blade.

'You've killed my boy!' she cried, waves of a mother's grief exploding from her.

The monster raised a thick black claw, wagging it in a show of disagreement, before pointing it at her. Its voice gurgled, a malevolent laugh that belonged to the dark places of the world.

'For you. Came. For you . . .'

Tilly's eyes widened. She staggered forward, sword flailing wildly, but the creature powerfully swung out its arm,

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claws meeting her as she ran, the sword tumbling from her grasp. The impact sent her flying through the air towards the kitchen. She landed on the table with a sickening crunch, sending crockery tumbling to shatter on the tiled floor.

Twitching and shuddering, Drew could only watch on as the monster sent his mother crashing into the kitchen. As it followed her, all he wanted was the strength to rise and attack the beast, bring it down, tear its throat from its body. But he was paralysed by an unfathomable weakness that had now consumed him.

The creature slowly advanced into the kitchen, drawing out the inevitable. It stepped through the chaos, wind cloaking it with rainwater as it shambled up to the table. A huge clawed hand trailed playfully along the wood, blood dripping on to the surface.

Tilly Ferran whispered the word 'No' over and over, again and again, but she knew this was her end, knew there was nothing she could do to stop the monster. The beast shook its head, stinking drool falling on to the table beside her head.

'I thought . . . I thought I was safe from you,' she mouthed, though the words found no volume. 'I thought you'd never find us.'

The animal snarled a grin, leaning in towards her and mouthing a single word as it opened its mouth.

'Never.'

Then it closed its jaws round her throat.

Indescribable anger and fear raged through Drew's body as he watched the nightmare scene unfold. He closed his eyes, willing his limbs to move but was instead assailed by a feverish spasm.

It started in his guts, as before, but worse. Much worse. He felt his insides tearing now, fighting not to pull free from his body, but twisting about and finding fresh homes. His bowels seemed to rise from the pit of his belly and shift further back, while his lungs grew

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threefold, great gasps of air racing into his chest. As the lungs grew, so did the rib cage, straining at first before cracking and popping. His chest expanded as his ribs took a new shape. The pain was unbearable. He wanted to yell out loud against the pain, but nothing came other than a silent scream.

He gritted his teeth as he felt a pressure grip his skull like a vice. The strain increased, Drew thought his eyes might burst from his sockets. He felt his gums beginning to tear as his teeth seemed to work themselves free. His arms came up before him, but he could only stare in horror as his hands distorted, stretched and elongated, with his nails tearing from his fingers into great long claws. Hair shot from his flesh, up his arms, from his chest, and he felt his mind threatening to slip away. His skull cracked under the pressure, and his jaw dislocated when a muzzle broke out.

His eyes hazed over, yellow and baleful, as he looked up from where he crouched. A semblance of Drew's mind remained, locked away inside, unable to fathom this horrifying transformation. He was looking on, a witness to what unfolded, as if suspended from the ceiling above. Fur bristled along his spine as, hackles raised, he watched his enemy, the intruder's back turned.

He let out a low growl, almost inaudible over the sound of the storm, but the monster heard him. It turned, slowly, blood staining its muzzle as it looked back into the sitting room. Disbelief appeared on the monster's face. It faced the boy, or what had been the boy, warily.

Before the creature could move Drew instinctively leapt forward. He cleared the distance between them in one bound, crashing into the beast's chest and the two tumbled to the floor in a ball of flailing claw, tooth and fur. The monster tried to defend itself from Drew, but the beast-boy was taken by a furious hunger, a rage that was

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unstoppable. The monster, though clearly stronger and a seasoned killer and fighter, let slip its guard in the panic, and Drew's jaws snapped over its skull. He yanked the beast's head back in a sharp savage motion, and with a ragged tear the flesh came with it. Letting loose a screech of pain, the monster struck back, a clawed fist hitting Drew hard in the chest. The force of the blow sent the boy tumbling back, crashing into a dresser in an avalanche of crockery. His strength escaped him when he tried to get up, the jangling pain of broken ribs adding to the shock of being winded.

Looking up from where he lay in a heap, Drew saw the creature rise from the floor, towering over him again. Ragged breaths escaped from its mouth as moonlight streamed in through the kitchen window, illuminating the damage Drew had dealt it. The right-hand side of its face was missing, revealing torn sinew and cartilage slick with black blood. Bare skull caught the light, a crescent of bone that arched round the eye socket like a bright white sickle. Flesh hung in tatters from the side of its mouth, the teeth in all their glory vanishing into the shadows of its jaws.

Snarling, the monster let the remainder of its lips peel back, emitting a gurgling growl. Raising its hands it let its claws play against one another, long black talons that clicked and clacked with anticipation. It hunched its shoulders as it took a step closer, its legs crouching, muscles flexing, as it prepared to pounce on the boy. A noise from the front of the house made the beast stop, its head twitching up, bobbing, as it listened intently. It looked back at the strange helpless creature at its feet, spitting blood at him in anger before turning and diving through the kitchen window. Sheet glass fell from the frame as the beast vanished into the stormy night.

Curtis Jobling

Struggling to regain his composure, Drew fought to get to his feet, grasping a leg of the kitchen table with one clawed hand over the other until he stood tall. While he climbed he could feel his body shifting, twisting again, as his human self returned. The hairs that covered his body receded, disappearing beneath his skin, and his bones and muscles reverted back to their natural state. Last to crack back into position was his muzzle, and he felt his face slowly return to normality as he looked down on his lifeless mother.

Laid out as if on a mortician's slab, Tilly Ferran stared up at the ceiling through dead eyes, blood spread from her throat over her chest. Unable to hold back the tears, Drew bent low, taking his mother in his arms and lifting her head until they were cheek to cheek. Tears streamed down his face as he sobbed in silence.

When Mack Ferran stepped through his house a short time later, it only took him a moment to register what had happened. Turning the corner of the upturned living room he looked through the archway into the kitchen. His wife of twenty years, the only true love he had ever known, lay sprawled on the table. His son stood hunched over her, her head in his hands, limp as a rag doll. She was dead, her throat torn ragged. The boy's jaws and hands were slick with blood, and when he looked up to face his father he had a wild, animal look that cried of madness and murder.

Mack's eyes glanced to the Wolfshead blade on the floor. Crouching slowly he let his right hand slip around the hilt, his fingers feeling their way before clenching into an all too familiar grip. All the while he fought back his fury, keeping his composure. He straightened as Trent dashed into the house, skidding to a halt behind his back.

WEREWORLD

'Put her down,' said the old soldier, raising the sword out before him, the blade motionless as the wind and rain still whipped through the ransacked house.

Drew trembled, his head shaking, uncomprehending. Why was his father holding the sword to him?

'Father . . .' he gasped. His voice came out low and bestial, struggling to escape through his still-twisted throat. His face twitched and spasmed as his dislocated jaw grated back into place.

'Put. Her. Down.' His father stepped closer, two, three steps.

Drew looked from his father to his mother, trying to comprehend his father's actions. Surely he couldn't think that Drew was responsible for this? Tears streaked down his face. His eyes darted towards Trent, his brother's face a mixture of fear and confusion at the scene before him. 'But, Father,' Drew said, bloodstained lips trembling.

'Stop saying that,' the older man screamed, his sword beginning to quiver in his hand as he struggled with his rage.

Drew wanted to be sick, wanted to collapse. What should he do? He tenderly released his grip and laid his mother's head back on to the table from the cradle of his arms. 'An animal...' he started to say, but could not complete the sentence.

His father leapt forward, covering the distance in a swift bound, sword scything through the air with deadly accuracy. The sword tore into Drew's shoulder blade, cutting deep and fast. Wailing, the boy stumbled back, scrabbling barefoot over broken glass as his father now stood before him and his mother. Trent watched the drama unfold from the archway into the living room, jaw slack as the horror played out.

'You're no son of mine,' his father spat, eyes red with tears as he snarled and choked on his words. 'Monster!' he screamed as he lunged forward once more.

Curtis Jobling

Drew raised his hands in a vain attempt at defence, but the sword flew straight to his belly, sliding in and through his stomach, right up to the hilt. Father and son were face to face, eyeball to eyeball. Drew's eyes blinked in disbelief as his father's eyes narrowed, his grisly job done. He released his hand from the sword hilt and let his son stumble backwards into the cold shadows of the kitchen.

Drew's fingers reached for the handle that sat flush to his stomach, stained dark with blood. He felt the tip of the blade scrape into the brickwork behind him from where it extended almost three feet from his back. His fingertips played over the decorative pommel, a steel Wolfshead glaring up at him in an emotionless stare.

Mack stepped back to his wife, taking her still-warm hand in his own before dropping to his knees. It had come to this. This boy who he had raised, this monster, taking the life of the most precious thing in his world. In his worst nightmares he'd never dreamt of this moment. The boy was an aberration, a monstrosity. Justice had been swift but he could never forgive himself for allowing this to happen. He looked at his wife, her ivory skin coated crimson with her own blood. *They had known, and still they had been unable to stop it.*

Trent stepped forward and patted his father's shoulder, just the once initially and then repeatedly, more insistent. At first Mack thought they were pats of consolation, of shared grief, but he quickly realized as the pats became frantic tugs that the boy wanted his attention. He looked up.

Trent stared wide-eyed across the kitchen, his hand stretched out and a trembling finger pointing towards his brother, who stood silhouetted by the shattered kitchen window. Still stood. The wind whipped around him as he teetered,

WEREWORLD

bloodied, blade firmly lodged through his midriff.

Mack rose, knowing what had to be done. How could he have forgotten? All those years in the king's service and his mind had slipped. He turned to his son as Drew watched on, speechless and stunned.

'Boy, go fetch me the poker,' he said. Trent simply stared at his brother who by all rights should have been dead but stood wobbling on his legs like a newborn lamb. His father grabbed him by the coat, shaking him. 'The poker from the fire, boy. Fetch it. And be quick about it!'

Drew watched his brother dart into the living room. The whole thing was surreal, all of the night's events escaping explanation, a twisted dream. The beast, his mother, the transformation that had taken him. His own father had run him through with a sword. Surprisingly the pain from the sword seemed diminished somewhat, dull compared to the bone-breaking injuries the monster had dealt him. He should have been lying on the floor in a pool of his blood. Yet somehow he still lived, the Wolfshead blade slicing him like a stuck pig, and now his father wanted the old poker from the fireplace. Drew used to play with that poker as a boy, fascinated by the fancy metalwork that ran the length of it up to the silver handle.

But this wasn't a dream. Drew fought the nausea that welled up inside him. His father had attempted to kill him once already tonight and looked determined to try again. The next time he was bound to succeed. Drew's decision was made. He clambered up on to the window frame, before looking back just the once. His father stood there, obscuring his mother from his view.

'Hurry, boy!' yelled Mack Ferran as Trent snatched up the poker from the cluttered chaos of the living room. Drew hovered on the glass-peppered windowsill, halfnaked in tattered clothing that flapped in the wind. His eyes glinted as his father stared at him with

Curtis Jobling

an unfaltering gaze.

'Give it to me,' Mack called as Trent stumbled through the broken furniture and thrust the poker towards him. He grabbed it by the pointed end, raising the silver pommel over his head before turning back to the boy who used to be his son. Drew had killed now, would kill again no doubt. He had a taste for blood.

But it was too late. The window was empty, now simply framing the rain that lashed in. Mack Ferran slowly lowered the poker and shoved it through a loop of leather on his belt.

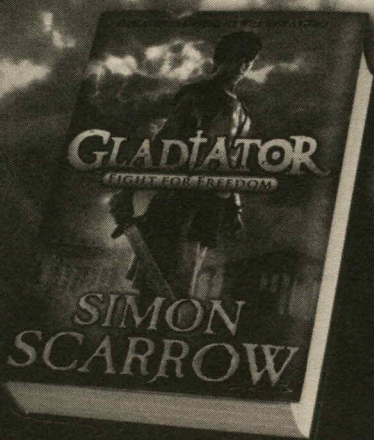
His other hand settled on to the hunting horn on his hip, palm closing over the cool ivory as he crossed over to the window. He peered through the rain that flooded the muddy yard outside.

Beyond, in the black night sky, the moon stared down, full and white.

The boy was gone.



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ROME, 61 BC

RECRUITED as a gladiator, young Marcus Cornelius Primus faces a new life of brutal training, governed by strict rules, as he learns the skills of an elite warrior.

But Marcus cannot simply forget his past. His father lies murdered by soldiers and his mother has been kidnapped and forced into slavery. Marcus is determined to find his father's old commander, Pompeius the Great, to seek justice for his family and set his mother free.

Yet, unbeknown to him, Marcus is hiding a life-threatening secret. And if the Romans discover it, there will be no escape . . .

GLADIATOR

Chapter 16

There were twenty-three other boys in the youth class under the command of a wizened old instructor named Amatus. Thin and sinewy, Amatus had fought as a retiarius for fifteen years. He had won most of his fights, and been spared by the crowds in the handful that he had lost, but had failed to distinguish himself sufficiently to win the favour and rewards that some of his contemporaries achieved. So he was destined to live out the remainder of his days as a slave, instructing new recruits in the gladiator school of Porcino.

Marcus was one of the youngest in the class. He may have lacked the years but, having been brought up on a farm and encouraged to exercise regularly by his father, he was fit and strong for his age. The other boys had come from across the empire and had different-coloured skins and features, and Marcus could only understand a handful of them who spoke either Latin or Greek. They had all arrived at the school within the last month and a pecking order had already been established.

The self-appointed leader of the group was a large Celtic boy, named Ferax, from one of the tribes that lived close to the Alps. He was three or four years older than Marcus, and much taller and broader. He spoke Latin with a coarse accent and walked with a pronounced swagger when he led the youths out on to parade each morning. From the outset he had taken a dislike to Marcus, when they first spoke shortly after Marcus had arrived. He had finished using the latrine and was returning to his stall when Ferax and his four cronies blocked his path.

'Son of a Roman centurion, eh?' Ferax sneered. 'You look more like the son of a sewer rat to me.'

His companions laughed. Marcus glared back, bunching his

Simon Scarrow

hands into fists. He did not want to fight the larger boy, but at the same time he did not want to take his insults.

'In case you didn't know, my name is Ferax.' The Celt thumbed his chest. 'This is my gang. These two are Celts like me.' He indicated the two tall blond-haired boys to one side. Then Ferax nodded at the other two, swarthy and slim. 'And these two were plucked from the slum of the Subura in Rome. Hard cases.' He stepped forward and juttied his head out, face to face with Marcus. 'Let me tell you my rules, sewer rat. My mates and I take the first share of the rations. Also, if I want, you and the others will do our duties for us once the day's training is done, such as fetching water or cleaning our kit.'

'You can fetch your own water,' Marcus replied.

'Oh!' Ferax chuckled. 'We've got a tough one here, lads! I'd better warn you that the last lad who refused to do what I say got himself a good beating. Once word got round about what happened to him, all the other boys have been as good as gold. So, you do what I say, and you won't have any trouble. Otherwise...Ferax took a step back and clenched his fist in front of Marcus's face. 'You'll be feeling this breaking your nose. Understand?'

Marcus stood quite still and stared back in silence. Ferax nodded, then turned to his cronies. 'Right, the greeting's over. Let's leave him.'

As they strode away, Marcus pressed his lips together. Ferax was a bully. He would have to be watched carefully and avoided as far as possible. Even so, Marcus felt a powerful urge to confront him.

But not yet. Later, when he had been toughened up and knew how to handle an opponent. Then he'd see just how tough the Celt really was.

While the men worked out all day, the youths were

GLADIATOR

dismissed from the training ground during the afternoon when they were sent to the kitchen to help prepare the evening meal, and then serve it to the men in the cell block, and the gladiator quarters, when evening came. It was hard and demeaning work, but Marcus carried it out without any complaint, and all the time his mind remained fixed on the need to escape from the school and make his way to Rome. He also thought of his mother, condemned to toil on the estate of Decimus. It made his heart heavy to think of her, and knew that she would be worrying about him in turn.

Not that she would easily recognize him any more, he reflected ruefully. Like all the others who had been trooped out of the cell block that first morning, Marcus had been issued with two grey tunics and two pairs of boots, each one bearing an identifying numeral burnt into the heel of each boot. All their existing clothing had been taken away – the best of it sold to a local merchant, the rest to be burned. Marcus's head had been crudely shaved. Now, all the trainees looked hard and brutal and difficult to distinguish from each other, like the chain-gangs of convicted men sent to the mines. Marcus had hated having his head shaved. The slave who did it handled his cutting shears with little care, scraping his scalp in a number of places. But even that torment was nothing compared to what came next.

Once the boys emerged from the caged pen where they had been sheared, dazed and bleeding from the cuts and scrapes on their scalps, Amatus had led them into the forge in the corner of the compound. A dozen of the school's guards were waiting for them, and beyond stood a slave, sweat running down his face as he worked a small furnace out of which a long iron handle extended.

Simon Scarrow

'First boy, come forward,' Amatus ordered, gesturing to one of the Nubians. The boy flinched, but before he could try to edge back into the ranks of his comrades, two of the guards grabbed his arms and pinned him between them. Then they dragged him towards the forge as he struggled wildly in their grasp. Amatus took a dampened rag and grasped the end of the iron handle. As he drew out the branding iron, the shaped symbol at the end – a large letter P above two crossed swords – glowed orange and the heated air around it wavered. He approached the Nubian boy who was now writhing desperately in the grip of the two guards.

'Hold him still,' Amatus ordered and the guards braced themselves and kept the boy from moving. Amatus pulled back the boy's tunic and pressed the branding iron on to his chest, just above the heart. The boy screamed as there came a sizzling noise and the air filled with the acrid scent of burning flesh. A moment later it was over, and Amatus stepped back as the boy fell limp. The guards dragged him outside the forge and dropped him on the ground.

'Next one!' Amatus called out.

One by one they were taken forward and branded with the symbol of Porcino's gladiator school. As they waited, the boys glanced at each other nervously, some shuffling away from the front of the crowd in a bid to put off the torment. But that was as far as they got, as the other guards herded them back. Marcus's terror at the prospect of being branded was made worse by every cry of fear and scream of agony that came out of the forge. But he kept silent and did not attempt to try to move to the back of the group. He glanced round and met the gaze of Ferax.

The Celt stared back, and Marcus saw that he too was afraid. Ferax had been shaking as their eyes had met, and now he looked angry, glaring at Marcus. Taking a deep breath, he pushed through to the front of the crowd and stood as tall as he could. He crossed

GLADIATOR

his arms and waited to be called forward. When the next victim had been carried out, Amatus thrust the iron back into the furnace to heat it again. Then he turned to the remaining boys. 'Next!'

Ferax took a step forward, but then Marcus blurted out, 'Me! I'll go next.'

Amatus nodded and the guards stepped forward to take his arms. Marcus felt his heart pounding as he stepped towards the forge. He had no idea why he was doing this, other than it seemed to prove something to Ferax and the others, not to mention Amatus and the guards. As he approached the forge, he pulled his tunic down from the collar to expose his chest. Amatus nodded to the guards. 'Hold him.'

Marcus let them take his arms, but stood still, muscles tensed and teeth gritted so hard his jaw hurt. Amatus looked surprised and paused a moment before taking the brand out of the forge again.

'Well, looks like one of you at least has got some backbone.' He smiled faintly at Marcus. 'Brace yourself, lad, this is going to hurt, like nothing you've ever known.'

He raised the branding iron. Marcus's eyes widened as he beheld the shimmering white shape. The air around it rippled. Amatus placed his left hand on Marcus's chest to steady it and brought the branding iron up. At the last moment Marcus clenched his eyes tightly shut. There was an instant when he felt the heat, then his world exploded in a torrent of burning agony and horror. It felt as if he had been struck by a ram, then a searing, stabbing shaft of agony pierced his body. He smelt his flesh burning, sharp and acrid, making him feel dizzy and sick. He heard the hiss and sizzle as his flesh scorched. Then the pressure eased as Amatus drew back the brand. But the agony only increased. Tears pricked out in the corner of Marcus's eyes and a keening moan forced its way between his clamped teeth.

Simon Scarrow

'Easy with that one,' he heard Amatus say. 'The lad's got guts, I'll say that for him.'

As they stepped out into the open, the guards eased Marcus down on to the ground and gently pushed him back against the plastered wall. He opened his eyes and stared around at the others. His heart was still beating fast, and the pain consumed his mind as he sat stiffly and gritted his teeth. The cries and whimpers of the boys who had gone before him sounded in his ears. Marcus shifted his eyes to the side and saw Ferax looking at him. The Celt looked furious and his lips curled into an expression of hatred. Then the guards took him and hauled him towards the forge as he began to struggle in their grip. Marcus did not watch – but he heard the animal groan of rage and pain as Amatus branded Ferax. Suddenly the pain was too much for Marcus and he just had time to lean to one side before he vomited. And again, until there was nothing in his stomach. Then he slumped back against the wall and passed out.

When he came to, he was lying on straw, and staring up into the rafters of the cell block. At once he felt the sharp sting of the burn on his chest and groaned as he struggled to rise to his elbows.

'Easy there,' a voice said comfortingly and Pelleneus loomed over him. He had a wet rag in his hand and offered it to Marcus. 'Try this. It helps ease the pain...a little.'

Marcus took the rag and looked down. The burn was red and dotted with pale blisters that wept. He dabbed at the burn as gently as he could and felt a fresh wave of pain.

'Ahhhhhh...'

The dampened rag only seemed to make the pain worse and he had to fight it off before he handed the rag back and forced himself to nod his thanks.

GLADIATOR

'Hurts like Hades, doesn't it?' Pelleneus said and took a sharp breath.

'You too?' asked Marcus, gesturing towards the Athenian's breast.

'All of us. Though some went with a fight.' He nodded towards Phyrus who sat against the other side of the stall, glowering. Marcus could see that his face was bruised and one eye was badly swollen.

'It took six of us to hold him down.' Pelleneus smiled faintly. The lad doesn't know his own strength.'

Marcus frowned. 'You held him down? You helped them to brand Phyrus?'

'We had to. If it had been left to the guards and the instructors, then our boy here would have struck them down. You heard what they do to any of us trainees who turn on one of Porcino's staff. I'd sooner Phyrus knocked me cold than one of them, and go and get himself crucified.'

'I suppose so,' Marcus shrugged. 'Doesn't seem right though.'

'It was that, or watch him die,' Pelleneus replied tersely. 'What would you have done?'

Marcus wanted to say that he would have refused to help subdue Phyrus, that he would have fought at the giant's side to resist the agony and the shame of being branded as the property of Porcino. But however much he might want to fight back, he knew that Pelleneus was right. There was nothing he could have done. Nothing any of them could have done. He looked down at his lap in despair.

Pelleneus took pity on him. 'Marcus, you're a slave now. You'd better get used to the idea as soon as you can. If you sit there dreaming of resistance and escape, then you will only make life ever more miserable for yourself. It will start to drive you mad.' He

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paused for a moment. 'That's what happened to me. I refused to accept slavery. I disobeyed my masters and even tried to run away once. They recaptured me a few days later and beat me black and blue. That's what resisting your master gets you – pain and more suffering. Take it from me, best thing you can do is accept that the past is dead to you. Look to the future. Stay alive and, one day, win your freedom. That's all that matters to you now.'

Marcus nodded slowly, as if accepting the advice. But deep inside he could not do what Pelleneus told him to do. It went against every fibre of his being, and betrayed the memory of his father, and the duty he owed his mother. Marcus silently swore an oath that he would never forget the past. Besides, it was the memory of all that he had lost, and all that he had to avenge, that filled him with the determination to endure the terrible situation he found himself in.

'Ah, so the centurion's brat is stirring at last!'

Marcus looked up and saw Ferax standing in the entrance to the stall. Behind him stood his cronies. All of them were stripped to the waist so that their chests were bared, exposing the blistered emblem of the school's brand. The Celt regarded Marcus with a sneer. 'Last I saw of you was when you fainted outside the forge.'

Marcus swallowed nervously and rose to his feet. 'At least they didn't have to drag me in there.'

'What?' Ferax frowned. 'You calling me a coward? I took the branding like a man.' He puffed up his chest and rested his hands on his hips. 'I stood it like a warrior.'

'Yes,' Marcus smiled thinly. Even though Ferax was far bigger than him, and his heart was pounding in his chest, he recalled the fear he had seen in the Celt boy's face before he was branded, and it gave Marcus some courage to face up to him. 'I heard you, er, war cry. So did everyone else, I imagine. Still, it was quite painful.'

'At least I didn't faint, like some girl.'

GLADIATOR

'No, you didn't,' Marcus conceded. 'You just sounded like one.'

Ferax's nostrils flared. 'You'll pay for that, you Roman runt.' He balled his hands into fists and entered the stall. Marcus stood his ground, bracing his feet apart as he raised his hands and held them ready to grab his foe, or clench them to strike back. His face contorted into a snarl. Ferax paused to look at him and then laughed.

'By the Gods, just look at him. He must think he's Mars, the war god!'

His friends laughed with him and then Ferax turned back to face Marcus, all trace of humour gone from his expression. All that Marcus could see there now was a cruel determination to cause him as much pain and humiliation as possible. He felt his guts turn to ice, but still stood his ground, prepared to take a beating long before he ever asked for mercy.

'I'm going to enjoy this,' Frax growled. 'I'm going to tear you apart.'

Oh no you don't,' a deep voice rumbled. Marcus turned in surprise and saw Phyrus rising to his feet. The giant stepped between the two boys and glared at Ferax. 'If you hurt him, I hurt you. I hurt you bad. You and those others.'

Phyrus raised a huge fist and smacked it down into the palm of the other hand. 'See?'

Ferax flinched at the sound. He stared at Phyrus with a mixture of awe and frustration, and then backed away to the entrance to the stall. There he turned his attention back to Marcus.

'You're safe for now, brat. But you'll have to fight your own battles some time. When you do, I'll be there, waiting. You hear? Come on, lads,' he waved to his followers and moved away towards the other end of the cell block.

GLADIATOR

Marcus relaxed as he watched them go. He nodded to Phyrus.
'Thanks.'

Phyrus shrugged and scratched his chin. 'Don't like bullies. They're scum. Let me know if that boy gives you any more trouble.'

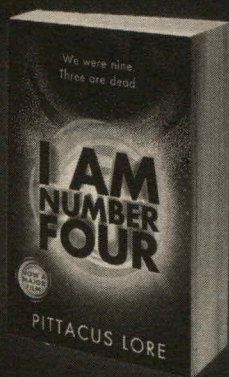
He turned away and returned to his corner. Despite his gratitude, Marcus knew that Ferax was right. He could afford to bide his time. Marcus could not escape, and the time would come when he must face the Celt on his own.

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GLADIATOR

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In the beginning we were nine.

We left when we were very young, almost too young to remember. Almost. And now . . .

Three are gone.

We are here to keep our race alive,
which was almost entirely obliterated.
We're just trying to survive.

Six are left.

But we are hunted, and the hunters won't
stop until they've killed us all.

They caught Number One in Malaysia.

Number Two in England.

And Number Three in Kenya.

I am Number Four.

I know that I am next.

The door starts shaking. It's a flimsy thing made of bamboo shoots held together with tattered lengths of twine. The shake is subtle and stops almost immediately. They lift their heads to listen, a fourteen-year-old boy and a fifty-year-old man, who everyone thinks is his father but who was born near a different jungle on a different planet hundreds of lightyears away. They are lying shirtless on opposite sides of the hut, a mosquito net over each cot. They hear a distant crash, like the sound of an animal breaking the branch of a tree, but in this case, it sounds like the entire tree has been broken.

What was that?' the boy asks.

'Shh,' the man replies.

They hear the chirp of insects, nothing more. The man brings his legs over the side of the cot when the shake starts again. A longer, firmer shake, and another crash, this time closer. The man gets to his feet and walks slowly to the door. Silence. The man takes a deep breath as he inches his hand to the latch. The boy sits up.

'No,' the man whispers, and in that instant the blade of a sword, long and gleaming, made of a shining white metal that is not found on Earth, comes through the door and sinks deeply into the man's chest. It protrudes six inches out through his back, and is quickly pulled free. The man grunts. The boy gasps. The man takes a single breath, and utters one word: 'Run.' He falls lifeless to the floor.

The boy leaps from the cot, bursts through the rear wall. He doesn't bother with the door or a window; he literally runs through the wall, which breaks apart as if it's paper, though it's made of strong, hard African mahogany. He tears into the Congo night, leaps over trees, sprints at a speed somewhere around sixty miles per hour. His sight and hearing are beyond human. He dodges trees, rips through

Pittacus Lore

snarled vines, leaps small streams with a single step. Heavy footsteps are close behind him, getting closer every second. His pursuers also have gifts. And they have something with them. Something he has only heard hints of, something he never believed he would see on Earth.

The crashing nears. The boy hears a low, intense roar. He knows whatever is behind him is picking up speed. He sees a break in the jungle up ahead. When he reaches it, he sees a huge ravine, three hundred feet across and three hundred feet down, with a river at the bottom. The river's bank is covered with huge boulders. Boulders that would break him apart if he fell on them. His only chance is to get across the ravine. He'll have a short running start, and one chance. One chance to save his own life. Even for him, or for any of the others on Earth like him, it's a near impossible leap. Going back, or going down, or trying to fight them means certain death. He has one shot.

There's a deafening roar behind him. They're twenty, thirty feet away. He takes five steps back and runs – and just before the ledge, he takes off and starts flying across the ravine. He's in the air three or four seconds. He screams, his arms outstretched in front of him, waiting for either safety or the end. He hits the ground and tumbles forward, stopping at the base of a mammoth tree. He smiles. He can't believe he made it, that he's going to survive. Not wanting them to see him, and knowing he needs to get farther away from them, he stands. He'll have to keep running.

He turns towards the jungle. As he does, a huge hand wraps itself around his throat. He is lifted off the ground. He struggles, kicks, tries to pull away, but knows it's futile, that it's over. He should have expected that they'd be on both sides, that once they found him, there would be no escape. The Mogadorian lifts him so that he can see the boy's chest, see the amulet

that is hanging around his neck, the amulet that only he and his kind can wear. He tears it off and puts it somewhere inside the long black cloak he is wearing, and when his hand emerges it is holding the gleaming white metal sword. The boy looks into the Mogadorian's deep, wide, emotionless black eyes, and he speaks.

'The Legacies live. They will find each other, and when they're ready, they're going to destroy you.'

The Mogadorian laughs, a nasty, mocking laugh. It raises the sword, the only weapon in the universe that can break the charm that until today protected the boy, and still protects the others. The blade ignites in a silver flame as it points to the sky, as if it's coming alive, sensing its mission and grimacing in anticipation. And as it falls, an arc of light speeding through the blackness of the jungle, the boy still believes that some part of him will survive, and some part of him will make it home. He closes his eyes just before the sword strikes. And then it is over.

Chapter 1

In the beginning there were nine of us. We left when we were young, almost too young to remember.

Almost.

I am told the ground shook, that the skies were full of light and explosions. We were in that two-week period of the year when both moons hang on opposite sides of the horizon. It was a time of celebration, and the explosions were at first mistaken for fireworks. They were not. It was warm, a soft wind blew in from off the water. I am always told the weather: it was warm. There was a soft wind. I've never understood why that matters.

What I remember most vividly is the way my grandmother looked that day. She was frantic, and sad. There were tears

Pittacus Lore

in her eyes. My grandfather stood just over her shoulder. I remember the way his glasses gathered the light from the sky. There were hugs. There were words said by each of them. I don't remember what they were. Nothing haunts me more.

It took a year to get here. I was five when we arrived. We were to assimilate ourselves into the culture before returning to Lorien when it could again sustain life. The nine of us had to scatter, and go our own ways. For how long, nobody knew. We still don't. None of them know where I am, and I don't know where they are, or what they look like now. That is how we protect ourselves because of the charm that was placed upon us when we left, a charm guaranteeing that we can only be killed in the order of our numbers, so long as we stay apart. If we come together, then the charm is broken.

When one of us is found and killed, a circular scar wraps around the right ankle of those still alive. And residing on our left ankle, formed when the Loric charm was first cast, is a small scar identical to the amulet each of us wears. The circular scars are another part of the charm. A warning system so that we know where we stand with each other, and so that we know when they'll be coming for us next. The first scar came when I was nine years old. It woke me from my sleep, burning itself into my flesh. We were living in Arizona, in a small border town near Mexico. I woke screaming in the middle of the night, in agony, terrified as the scar seared itself into my flesh. It was the first sign that the Mogadorians had finally found us on Earth, and the first sign that we were in danger. Until the scar showed up, I had almost convinced myself that my memories were wrong, that what Henri told me was wrong. I wanted to be a normal kid living a normal life, but I knew then, beyond any doubt or discussion, that I wasn't. We moved to Minnesota the next day.

The second scar came when I was twelve. I was in school, in Colorado, participating in a spelling bee. As soon as the pain started I knew what was happening, what had happened to Number Two. The pain was excruciating, but bearable this time. I would have stayed on the stage, but the heat lit my sock on fire. The teacher who was conducting the bee sprayed me with a fire extinguisher and rushed me to the hospital. The doctor in the ER found the first scar and called the police. When Henri showed, they threatened to arrest him for child abuse. But because he hadn't been anywhere near me when the second scar came, they had to let him go. We got in the car and drove away, this time to Maine. We left everything we had except for the Loric Chest that Henri brought along on every move. All twenty-one of them to date.

The third scar appeared an hour ago. I was sitting on a pontoon boat. The boat belonged to the parents of the most popular kid at my school, and unbeknownst to them, he was having a party on it. I had never been invited to any of the parties at my school before. I had always, because I knew we might leave at any minute, kept to myself. But it had been quiet for two years. Henri hadn't seen anything in the news might lead the Mogadorians to one of us, or might alert us to them. So I made a couple of friends. And one of them introduced me to the kid who was having the party. Everyone met at a dock. There were three coolers, some music, girls I had admired from afar but never spoken to, even though I wanted to. We pulled out from the dock and went half a mile into the Gulf of Mexico. I was sitting on the edge of the pontoon with my feet in the water, talking to a cute, darkhaired, blue-eyed girl named Tara, when I felt it coming. The water around my leg started boiling, and my lower leg started glowing where the scar was imbedding itself. The third of the Loric symbols, the third warning. Tara started

Pittacus Lore

screaming and people started crowding around me. I knew there was no way to explain it. And I knew we would have to leave immediately.

The stakes were higher now. They had found Number Three, wherever he or she was, and Number Three was dead. So I calmed Tara down and kissed her on the cheek and told her it was nice to meet her and that I hoped she had a long beautiful life. I dove off the side of the boat and started swimming, underwater the entire time, except for one breath about halfway there, as fast as I could until I reached the shore. I ran along the side of the highway, just inside of the tree line, moving at speeds as fast as any of the cars. When I got home, Henri was at the bank of scanners and monitors that he used to research news around the world, and police activity in our area. He knew without me saying a word, though he did lift my soaking pants to see the scars.

In the beginning we were a group of nine.

Three are gone, dead.

There are six of us left.

They are hunting us, and they won't stop until they've killed us all.

I am Number Four.

I know that I am next.

Chapter 2

I stand in the middle of the drive and stare up at the house. It is light pink, almost like cake frosting, sitting ten feet above the ground on wooden stilts. A palm tree sways in the front. At the back of the house a pier extends twenty yards into the Gulf of Mexico. If the house were a mile to the south, the pier would be in

the Atlantic Ocean.

Henri walks out of the house carrying the last of the boxes, some of which were never unpacked from our last move. He locks the door, then leaves the keys in the mail slot beside it. It is two o'clock in the morning. He is wearing khaki shorts and a black polo. He is very tanned, with an unshaven face that seems downcast. He is also sad to be leaving. He tosses the final boxes into the back of the truck with the rest of our things.

'That's it,' he says.

I nod. We stand and stare up at the house and listen to the wind come through the palm fronds. I am holding a bag of celery in my hand.

'I'll miss this place,' I say. 'Even more than the others.'

'Me too.'

'Time for the burn?'

'Yes. You want to do it, or you want me to?'

'I'll do it.'

Henri pulls out his wallet and drops it on the ground. I pull out mine and do the same. He walks to our truck and comes back with passports, birth certificates, social security cards, checkbooks, credit cards and bank cards, and drops them on the ground. All of the documents and materials related to our identities here, all of them forged and manufactured. I grab from the truck a small gas can we keep for emergencies. I pour the gas over the small pile. My current name is Daniel Jones. My story is that I grew up in California and moved here because of my dad's job as a computer programmer. Daniel Jones is about to disappear. I light a match and drop it, and the pile ignites. Another one of my lives, gone. As we always do, Henri and I stand and watch the fire. *Bye, Daniel, I think, it was nice knowing you.* When the fire burns down, Henri looks over at me.

'We gotta go.'

Pittacus Lore

'I know.'

'These islands were never safe. They're too hard to leave quickly, too hard to escape from. It was foolish of us to come here.'

I nod. He is right, and I know it. But I'm still reluctant to leave. We came here because I wanted to, and for the first time, Henri let me choose where we were going. We've been here nine months, and it's the longest we have stayed in any one place since leaving Lorien. I'll miss the sun and the warmth. I'll miss the gecko that watched from the wall each morning as I ate breakfast. Though there are literally millions of geckos in south Florida, I swear this one follows me to school and seems to be everywhere I am. I'll miss the thunderstorms that seem to come from out of nowhere, the way everything is still and quiet in the early-morning hours before the terns arrive. I'll miss the dolphins that sometimes feed when the sun sets. I'll even miss the smell of sulfur from the rotting seaweed at the base of the shore, the way that it fills the house and penetrates our dreams while we sleep.

'Get rid of the celery and I'll wait in the truck,' Henri says. 'Then it's time.'

I enter a thicket of trees off to the right of the truck. There are three Key deer already waiting. I dump the bag of celery out at their feet and crouch down and pet each of them in turn. They allow me to, having long gotten over their skittishness. One of them raises his head and looks at me. Dark, blank eyes staring back. It almost feels as though he passes something to me. A shudder runs up my spine. He drops his head and continues eating.

'Good luck, little friends,' I say, and walk to the truck and climb into the passenger seat.

We watch the house grow smaller in the side mirrors until Henri pulls onto the main road and the house disappears. It's a Saturday. I wonder what's happening at the party without me. What

they're saying about the way that I left and what they'll say on Monday when I'm not at school. I wish I could have said goodbye. I'll never see anyone I knew here ever again. I'll never speak to any of them. And they'll never know what I am or why I left. After a few months, or maybe a few weeks, none of them will probably ever think of me again.

Before we get on the highway, Henri pulls over to gas up the truck. As he works the pump, I start looking through an atlas he keeps on the middle of the seat. We've had the atlas since we arrived on this planet. It has lines drawn to and from every place we've ever lived. At this point, there are lines crisscrossing all of the United States. We know we should get rid of it, but it's really the only piece of our life together that we have. Normal people have photos and videos and journals; we have the atlas. Picking it up and looking through it, I can see Henri has drawn a new line from Florida to Ohio. When I think of Ohio, I think of cows and corn and nice people. I know the license plate says THE HEART OF IT ALL. What 'All' is, I don't know, but I guess I'll find out.

Henri gets back into the truck. He has bought a couple of sodas and a bag of chips. He pulls away and starts heading toward U.S. 1, which will take us north. He reaches for the atlas.

'Do you think there are people in Ohio?' I joke.

He chuckles. 'I would imagine there are a few. And we might even get lucky and find cars and TV there, too.'

I nod. Maybe it won't be as bad as I think.

'What do you think of the name 'John Smith'?' I ask.

'Is that what you've settled on?'

'I think so,' I say. I've never been a John before, or a Smith.

'It doesn't get any more common than that. I would say it's a pleasure to meet you, Mr Smith.'

I smile. 'Yeah, I think I like "John Smith".'

'I'll create your forms when we stop.'

Pittacus Lore

A mile later we are off the island and cruising across the bridge. The waters pass below us. They are calm and the moonlight is shimmering on the small waves, creating dapples of white in the crests. On the right is the ocean, on the left is the gulf; it is, in essence, the same water, but with two different names. I have the urge to cry, but I don't. It's not that I'm necessarily sad to leave Florida, but I'm tired of running. I'm tired of dreaming up a new name every six months. Tired of new houses, new schools. I wonder if it'll ever be possible for us to stop.

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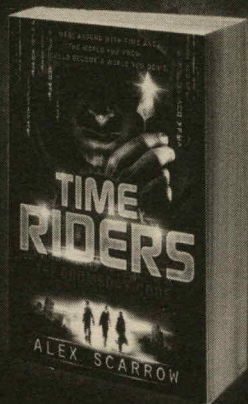
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TIME RIDERS

THE DOOMSDAY CODE



Liam O'Connor should have died at sea in 1912.
Maddy Carter should have died on a plane in 2010.
Sal Vikram should have died in a fire in 2026.

But all three have been given a second chance
- to work for an agency that no one knows
exists. Its purpose: to prevent time
travel destroying history ...

In 1994 British computer hacker Adam Lewis finds
his name in a coded manuscript that is almost
one thousand years old. How did Adam's name
get in there ... and why?

Confronted by Adam in 2001, the TimeRiders
travel back to twelfth-century Sherwood Forest to
discover the origins of the ancient message. But
when a strange hooded man appears interested in
the same thing, they begin to wonder - what
terrible threat does this cryptic link from
the past hold for the future?



TIME RIDERS



Chapter 28

1194, woods, Nottinghamshire

The fire crackled hungrily on the pine cones and dried brittle branches they'd gathered by the waning light of the winter's afternoon. A steady dusting of snow had slowed down their cart, and Cabot – sounding a lot more like a bad-tempered soldier than he did a pious monk – had finally had to concede they were going to have to make camp in the wilderness instead of seeking lodgings in the safety of some hamlet as they had done the night before.

Cabot spat on the flames as he finished a mouthful of stale bread. 'We will be in Oxfordshire tomorrow. And the royal household at Beaumont before afternoon.'

'Are you sure we'll be seen by John?' asked Liam.

'Aye. I'm sure. The poor fool is losing his hold on the country. He has done much that will enrage his brother, the king, including his foolish orders to Richard's Templars to take the Grail up north to Scotland 'stead of letting them store it in Beaumont.'

'Why did he do that?'

'I know not. Perhaps he had plans to hide it up there, to barter something out of his brother? So –' Cabot's eyes locked on Liam – 'if none of ye are of the Templar order, as I suspect, how is it ye know so much about the Grail?'

Liam smiled. 'You wouldn't believe me if I told you.'

Cabot spread his hands. 'I am willing to listen.'

Liam looked at Becks and Bob, both support units standing a dozen yards apart at the edge of the light cast by the fire, silently standing guard. He wondered how much the monk should know; how much he could help them if he did know. And, of course, how





Alex Scarrow

much contamination to history that might cause downstream from them. 'We're . . . we've come from the future.'

Cabot's grizzled face remained still, unimpressed by that. 'Future?'

'Quite a long time into the future, so it is. And, well . . . there's an ancient manuscript that mentions this Pandora. We came here to learn more about it.'

'Future . . . Do ye mean this in the way I think ye mean it?'

'Yes, *future*. As in days and years that haven't yet happened, but will.'

Cabot's eyes narrowed sceptically. 'How is that? A man's life can travel but in one direction. The sun rises then it sets. It cannot move the other way.'

'It's science,' replied Liam. 'I don't get how any of it works. But it does.'

'Science? What is this word?'

Liam shrugged. 'Knowledge of how things *work*, I suppose. It's quite big in my time. Science has given us all sorts of machines and understanding.'



Cabot looked down at Liam and shook his head. 'Ye are a strange young man, Liam of Connor, with an odd way about ye and the way that ye talk.' He smiled. 'Despite my better judgement warning me otherwise, ye are a young man I like. *But* I would strongly caution ye to keep such tales of coming from *tomorrows-yet-to-be* to yerself!'

Liam shrugged. Maybe Cabot was right. Trying to explain time travel to him, trying to explain how a history yet to happen *already exists* and – just to make things even more complicated – could even be *rewritten*, well, even Liam struggled with that sometimes.

'Anyway – ' Liam tossed a branch on the fire – 'all that aside, we came back to learn a bit more about what the secret of *Pandora*



Alex Scarrow

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'It's science,' replied Liam. 'I don't get how any of it works. But it does.'

'Science? What is this word?'

Liam shrugged. 'Knowledge of how things *work*, I suppose. It's quite big in my time. Science has given us all sorts of machines and understanding.'



Cabot looked down at Liam and shook his head. 'Ye are a strange young man, Liam of Connor, with an odd way about ye and the way that ye talk.' He smiled. 'Despite my better judgement warning me otherwise, ye are a young man I like. *But* I would strongly caution ye to keep such tales of coming from *tomorrows-yet-to-be* to yerself!'

Liam shrugged. Maybe Cabot was right. Trying to explain time travel to him, trying to explain how a history yet to happen *already exists* and – just to make things even more complicated – could even be *rewritten*, well, even Liam struggled with that sometimes.

'Anyway –' Liam tossed a branch on the fire – 'all that aside, we came back to learn a bit more about what the secret of *Pandora*



Alex Scarrow

valuables, but to kill them all first, then to pick through their cart for what might be worth taking.

Bob and Becks moved at exactly the same moment, identical AI routines calculating risk and available courses of action in precisely the same number of micro-seconds. Bob sprinted towards the nearest man, ducking down swiftly at the last moment to dodge the careless swing of his sword. He sprang up again and crushed the man's throat with the bullet-hard jab of his oversized fingers just beneath his jaw. As the man dropped to his knees, gasping and spraying blood from his mouth and nose, Bob grabbed hold of his sword, flipped it blade-over-hilt and caught it, then finished the bandit with a lightning-quick thrust into his chest.

Becks meanwhile had effortlessly relieved another man of his bow and, using it like a quarterstaff, had scooped him off his feet and on to his back. She dropped down on to him, knees on his chest, and grabbed his head, twisting it sharply until cartilage and bone cracked.



Bob's blade clattered with a heavy ring as a second man stepped forward and swung at him. Sword pommels locked, Bob pulled his sharply, yanking the other man's sword out of his hand. It flew through the air, still humming like a tuning fork, and clattered off the trunk of a nearby tree. The man, older than the others, a florid face framed with wisps of dirty white hair, screamed, 'I yield!'

He raised both his hands in surrender, a gesture entirely wasted on Bob. His next swing severed both of the upraised hands, sending them spinning to the snow-covered ground. The man screamed in agony, turned and ran into the darkness, waving bloody stumps before him.

Liam heard the twanging release of another drawstring and saw Becks had retrieved some arrows from the corpse at her feet. A grunt on the far side of their crackling fire, and a man, who





had been sneaking around to take Liam and Cabot from behind, staggered slow baby-steps forward, sporting a tuft of fletching from his forehead and a yard of bloody shaft out of the back. He toppled over on to the fire, sending a shower of sparks up into the dark sky.

The remaining bandits had already seen enough and turned and fled like startled hares, boot soles and swinging arrow quivers disappearing into the darkness. Someone's agonized drawn-out wailing – presumably the unfortunate handleless old man – quickly receded to an indistinct echo that merged with the other frightened calls of the remaining bandits as they tried to find each other in the darkness of the woods.

In those few seconds – little more than the time it had taken Cabot to retrieve his trusty campaign sword from the back of the cart and adopt the once-learned-never-forgotten on-guard stance of an experienced swordsman – four of their attackers lay dead.

'Good God!' gasped Cabot.

Bob walked over towards Liam. 'Are you all right, Liam O'Connor?' he asked casually.

'I'm fine, Bob. But you might want to take care of those,' he replied, pointing at the arrow shafts protruding from Bob's chest and hip.

'Affirmative.'

Becks joined them. 'I will assist you, Bob,' she said, calmly reaching for the barbed tip of the arrowhead poking out from between his shoulders. She snapped it off with a flick of her wrist. She reached around in front of Bob and pulled the shaft out of his chest with the sucking sound of puckered flesh.

Cabot watched in goggle-eyed silence as she snapped the second tip off and pulled the arrow out of Bob's hip without even a flicker of reaction on his face.





Alex Scarrow

'Blood is congealing from the two wounds already,' she said. 'I would estimate your combat functionality to be no less than ninety-five per cent of full capacity.'

'Agreed,' said Bob.

'What in the saints' names are ye?' hissed Cabot.

Bob glanced at him. 'Very tough human being, serr,' he replied unconvincingly.

'And ye,' Cabot said to Becks. 'No lady have I *ever* seen fight like that!'

'I am also a very tough -'

Liam laughed a little shakily, still adrenalin-pumped from the attack. 'It's all right, I told him we're from the *future* already. You can drop the old English now.'

Becks frowned. 'That will cause unnecessary contamination.'

Liam shook his head. 'Ah well, it's not like the fella believes a word I was saying anyway.'

Cabot was still holding his longsword aloft. His arms, now tired, lowered it to the ground. He leaned on the hilt and regarded the three of them in silence.

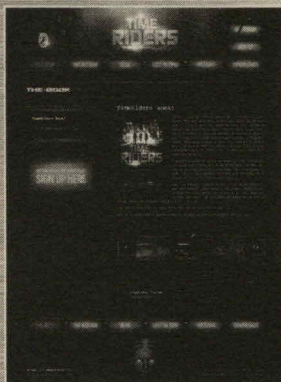
'Well, Liam of Connor . . . I think I believe ye now.'



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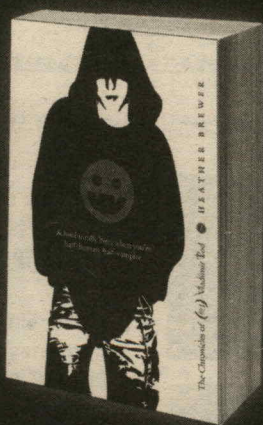


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closing in . . . fast!

The Chronicles of (131) Vladimir Tod

Chapter 3 *The Hidden Attic*

Vlad rolled out of bed and rubbed his eyes. Careful not to step on Henry, who was still snoring in his sleeping bag on the floor, he crossed the room and shut the door behind him, then stepped into the library. From the nearest recessed bookcase, he grabbed a copy of *The Theory and Practice of Telepathy* and went downstairs, where the smell of chilled blood and fried bacon greeted him. Mmm . . . the breakfast of champions. Aunt Nelly was at the stove and turned just as he took a seat at the long plank table. "Morning, sunshine."

Vlad blinked at her. "Morning, sulfuric acid."

"Pardon me?"

"Well, isn't it just kinda wrong to call a vampire 'sunshine'?"

"Oh. Sorry." She set a juice glass full of cool, deep red liquid in front of him, which he downed while she tapped the book. "Something interesting going on?"

Vlad ran the back of his hand across his lips, staining the skin burgundy. "Kinda. I read someone's thoughts last night. Somebody I didn't even know."

Nelly took a seat across from him and sipped her coffee. "I thought you could only read Henry's thoughts."

"I thought so, too." He scratched his chin and flipped open the book to a page covered with yellow sticky notes.

Nelly looked pensive. "Vladimir . . . you didn't . . ."

Vlad scanned the page, only half listening to Nelly. When he realized what she was implying, his jaw dropped. "No! I wouldn't taste somebody's blood on purpose."

"Except for Henry's, you mean." Nelly sipped her coffee, eyeing him over her glasses.

Heather Brewer

Vlad rolled his eyes and slid the book closer to him. "Aunt Nelly, I was eight years old. Can we let that one go already?"

"Well, you said before that you were only able to read Henry's thoughts after you'd ingested some of his blood. So if you didn't taste this person's blood, how do you suppose you could read his mind?" Her tone was even, but careful.

Vlad leaned over the book and perused his various notes, theories, and scribbled thoughts on telepathy. "No idea. But then, it's not like I have an *Encyclopedia Vampirica* to consult. So far, all I have are theories."

Nelly nudged a plate of sticky buns toward him and proceeded to cover her own plate with crisp bacon, scrambled eggs, and toast. Vlad grabbed one of the sweet pastries and dropped it onto his plate while Nelly refilled his glass with the blood he would need to begin his day. Nelly had never been squeamish when it came to Vlad's diet. She was a registered nurse and went to great lengths to sneak blood from the hospital for him. Nelly chewed a bit of bacon, watching him with great interest. "So what happened at midnight?"

"No clue. We left early." Vlad shrugged. Then, thinking about his overnight guest, he asked, "Is it cool if Henry stays another night? His parents aren't going to be back until Monday afternoon."

"So long as you boys can manage to find your way to school in the morning."

As if awakened by the mere mention of his name, Henry came bounding down the stairs and burst into the kitchen with a bad case of bed head and a happy, well-rested grin. Aunt Nelly slid him an empty plate, finished her bacon, and placed a kiss on Vlad's forehead. "See you later, boys. I've got a long shift today."

Vlad ran his finger thoughtfully along the lip of his glass. "Hey,

The Chronicles of (k=) Vladimir Tod

Nelly, we've got this family tree project in history. I was wondering if you could help me out."

She ruffled Henry's hair on her way to the door. "Have you checked the attic? I know your parents had some photo albums up there. They'd be more help than I would." Vlad stared after her, dumbfounded. Nelly sighed. "Honestly, Vladimir, you've lived here for three years and still don't know about the hidden attic? The door to it is a foot from your bed, for goodness' sake! I thought vampires were supposed to have ultrasensitive powers of intuition."

Vlad shrugged and picked up another sticky bun. "Don't you think if I had powers of intuition, I'd be doing better in math?"

Nelly groaned. "Let's hope you develop that next."

With the click of the front door, Vlad and Henry were left alone for the day.

They finished breakfast and settled down in front of the television, bouncing back and forth between watching cartoons and saving the world through PlayStation until morning slipped into the comfort of late afternoon. Henry had already beaten Vlad twice at *Race to Armageddon*, but on the third round, it looked as if Vlad might be making some headway. The prize, of course, was glory and riches, combined with the godlike status of having been the android to defeat the menacing alien king. But just as Vlad was raising his laser sword to strike the alien king down, Henry hit the turbo button and interrupted the blow with one of his own. Vlad dropped his controller with a groan. "I suck at this game."

"Yeah, but you can fly. I have to be better at something." Henry dropped his controller on the floor beside Vlad's and reached for his open soda can. The floor in front of the beanbag chairs was a battlefield of open potato-chip bags and candy wrappers.

Vlad shook his head. "I can't fly. Only hover a little."

Heather Brewer

"Fly, hover, whatever . . . it's cool! Plus, if you learn how to turn invisible, just think of the terror you could be in the girls' locker room." Henry wiggled his eyebrows and took another drink. "I wonder if you'll be able to turn into animals and stuff when you get older."

At first Vlad thought Henry was kidding, but when he stole a glance at his friend, he noticed that Henry's usually jovial demeanor had turned serious. Vlad shook his head. "That's stupid."

"Think about it. In all those old stories and legends, vampires can turn into bats and wolves, and fog and stuff." Henry shrugged at Vlad and dropped his gaze to the carpeted floor between them. "It's possible."

Vlad thumbed his controller and tried not to sound too intrigued. It had been something he'd wondered about for some time. "I guess. But I'm not a hundred percent vampire anyway. My mom was human. Remember?"

Henry lowered his voice some and watched Vlad with a careful expression. "You must miss them a lot."

"All the time." Vlad held his breath for a second and tried not to give in to the sudden threat of tears that he could feel building up in his eyes. There was never a moment when he wasn't thinking about his father and the kind sparkle in his eyes, or the tender way his mother would kiss him on top of his head whenever she walked within a three-foot radius of him. Three years without them would have been impossible if it hadn't been for Nelly. It didn't matter that they weren't actually related. Nelly and his mother had been closer than sisters and that, in Vlad's mind, made Nelly family.

"It was weird how they died." Henry unplugged his controller and wrapped the cord around it.

"Yeah. People don't normally just up and burst into flames."

The Chronicles of (1=1) Vladimir Tlod

Vlad took on a casual tone, but secretly wished Henry would forget the entire ordeal. He picked up his controller and reached for the console's reset button. "Let's play again, but this time I get to be the blue android."

"I'm hungry."

Apparently Vlad wasn't the only one with mind-reading abilities. "There's fried chicken in the fridge."

Henry disappeared into the kitchen and returned a moment later with a plate of chicken in his hands and a drumstick in his mouth. "I wuff Newwy's chippen."

Vlad wrinkled his nose, suppressing his growing nausea at the smell of cooked flesh. "Speaking of Nelly . . . I'd better work on that family tree. If I get another D in history, she'll kill me. When's it due, anyway?"

"Friday." Henry dropped a clean bone on the plate and looked at Vlad. "How much have you done?"

Vlad raised his eyebrows and smirked. "Does writing my name at the top of the page count?"

"I don't think so."

"Doesn't matter. I haven't done that yet anyway."

It didn't take long to find the hidden door to the attic. Vlad grabbed the flashlight from his dresser and slid in first, with Henry following close behind him. Narrow stairs hugged the wall and curved upward, leading them to the attic room above. At the top, Vlad reached up, hoping a string to a light would be dangling down somewhere nearby. Finding one, he tugged it once and illuminated the room with a soft glow.

Henry wrinkled his nose. "Dude, what smells like cat pee?"

"You mean besides your breath?"

"Don't make me get the holy water, Vlad."

Heather Brewer

Boxes lined the walls in various towering stacks. Vlad lugged one of the boxes off a stack and placed it on the floor at Henry's feet. He reached for another, and Henry asked, "What are we looking for exactly?"

"Photo albums and birth certificates. And if we're lucky, a family tree." Vlad pulled another box down and crouched on the wood floor. He tore the packing tape away from the seam and flipped open the flaps. The top was filled with nothing of interest. Tax papers, mostly, and the occasional folder of receipts. But toward the bottom Vlad found several shoe boxes overflowing with family photos. He set them to the side and reached for another box.

By the tenth box, they'd discovered several photo albums; two small velvet boxes containing his parents' wedding bands; and a leather-bound book with a strange symbol on the front, held securely in place by thick leather straps and two brass locks. Exhausted from the search, Vlad brushed a thin coat of dust from his knees. "I guess these will have to do."

With a nod, Henry wiped a cobweb from his ear, picked up a stack of photo albums, and disappeared into the passageway.

Vlad was two steps from joining him when he spotted a cylinder poking out of a small box atop one of the stacks. He picked it up and turned it over in his hand. It was small, no more than six inches long, smooth and completely black, except for the strange gold symbol engraved at one end: three slanted lines slashed across the bottom, encased in what looked like parentheses. He slid the cylinder into his pocket before turning off the light and making his way down the stairs in the dark.

Henry was waiting for him in the bedroom, but before Vlad could show off his curious find, Aunt Nelly called up to them, "I'm home. Who wants hamburgers?" They bolted down the stairs,

The Chronicles of (k) Vladimir T

stomachs growling, and proceeded to help Nelly prepare their evening meal. Once the table was set and the fries had come out of the oven, she placed a bottle labeled ketchup on the table. When Henry reached for it, she stopped him and handed him a different bottle. "Use this one, dear. That one's for Vlad."

Vlad proceeded to squirt a healthy glob of blood onto his plate, dipped a fry in it, and bit off the end. His hamburger was raw, and the blood from it had seeped visibly into the bun. He picked it up in both hands, feeling his fangs extend at the scent of it, and tore off a bite. Henry watched in disgust as the blood dripped from Vlad's bun to his plate, but Vlad responded only by chewing. Years of watching Vlad eat had apparently not been enough to keep Henry from getting grossed out.

It was dark outside, but after their meal, the boys settled onto the porch with a drink and watched the stars peek slowly out from behind their velvet-sky blanket. On their way out the door, Nelly had handed Henry one of those juices that come in the foil bags, with the sharp-ended straw poked into one end. She'd handed Vlad a drink of blood in the same manner. They enjoyed their drinks and the lingering sounds of approaching night for several minutes before Vlad spoke. "I wonder who will sub for Mr. Craig. We can't possibly get stuck with the principal for much longer." It was one of a thousand things running through his mind. He certainly didn't want it to be Mrs. Bell, with her blue hair, crooked teeth, and equally crooked, painted-on eyebrows. For some strange reason, she always smelled like aftershave and sore-muscle cream. It really made you wonder about her after-school activities. "Mrs. Bell took over for two weeks when Mr. Craig's brother died last year."

"Can't be her. She's teaching full-time at the high school now." Henry had cupped a moth in his hands and was watching it

Heather Brewer

fluttering against his palms.

Vlad took the last sip from his drink and set the container on the steps. Remembering the cylindrical object he'd found upstairs, he slipped it from his pocket and held it out for Henry's perusal. "Check this out. Found it up in the attic."

Henry released the moth, and as he slid the object out of Vlad's palm, Vlad felt a strange urge to close his hand and pull the cylinder away. Henry turned it over in his hands, admiring the engraved symbol on the bottom. "What is it?"

Vlad reached out and plucked it from Henry's hand. "No clue." He slid it back into his pocket and felt an instant blanket of comfort surround him.

Henry yawned and stretched his arms up toward the night sky. He had big, dark circles under his eyes.

Vlad yawned, too. Six in the morning came awfully early, and tomorrow he had the annoyance of some substitute teacher to deal with. With a stretch, Vlad moved up the steps and into the house, the promise of sleep heavy on his weary eyelids.

Chapter 4

The Search Continues

A man dressed entirely in black looked from the crumpled newspaper photograph in his gloved hand to the boy up ahead of him who was timidly crossing the street, clutching a bag from the Stop & Shop in one hand and wearing an old thirty-five-millimeter camera around his neck. Returning his attention to the photograph, the man nodded in satisfaction and moved stealthily up the street after the boy.

The Chronicles of (E) Vladimir Tod

The boy proceeded into a dark alleyway. The moon was full and high, casting a cool blue over the town of Bathory. Long shadows stretched across the street.

The man in black stuffed the clipping back into his pocket and quickened his pace.

The Stop & Shop bag hung limply from the boy's hand. With his other hand, the boy fiddled with the lens cap of his outdated camera, watching it far more closely than he watched where he was walking.

The man swung around him, standing in the boy's path.

It wasn't until the boy collided with the strange man that he noticed his presence. The bag fell from the boy's hand as he stumbled. "Oh jeez, sorry. I . . . I didn't see you there." He smiled weakly, apologetically, up at the stranger.

The man smiled, careful to keep his fangs hidden behind closed lips. "It's quite all right. Edgar Poe, isn't it?"

Eddie brushed some grime from his jeans and checked his camera for damage. "Yeah. Uh . . . well, Eddie, actually. Nobody but, uh . . . my mom calls me Edgar. Why? Do I know you?"

A large vein on Eddie's neck pulsed, sending a pang of hunger through the man's stomach. "Eddie, I was wondering if you could assist me."

The boy looked wary, but he didn't run.

The man slipped his hand into his pocket and withdrew the newspaper clipping. He held it up for the boy to see. "Do you recognize the boy standing next to you in this photo?"

Eddie glanced at the clipping. "Uh . . . yeah. I guess. Vlad Tod, right?"

The man licked his lips. The boy smelled like AB negative. Rare. Delectable. The champagne of blood types. "Where could I find him?"

Eddie shrugged and plucked the bag from the ground. "I . . . I don't know. The junior high, I guess." He stepped around the man and continued down the alleyway.

The man's stomach clenched once in hunger. He grabbed Eddie's shirt collar and opened his mouth wide, exposing his glistening fangs. "Don't you walk away from me! Tell me where he is. *Now.*"

Eddie's eyes widened with sudden terror. "What are you?"

The man lifted Eddie from the ground and pulled him closer, until his fangs were just inches from Eddie's small face. "I'm the boogeyman, Edgar. And I've come for your soul. Now tell me where I can find Vladimir Tod."

At first, the only sound coming from Eddie was the drizzle of liquid dripping from his jeans to the ground below. Then Eddie screamed.

"Edgar!" From the house at the end of the alley came a high-pitched, screeching voice that could only be Eddie's mother. "You'd better get home right now, Edgar! If I have to tell your father . . ."

The man released Eddie and slipped unnoticed from the alley, regretfully walking away from a warm meal and the information he needed about Tomas's son.

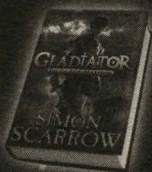
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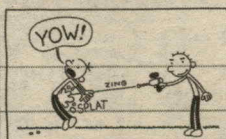


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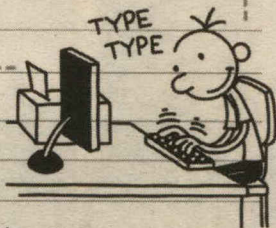
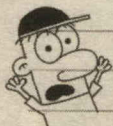
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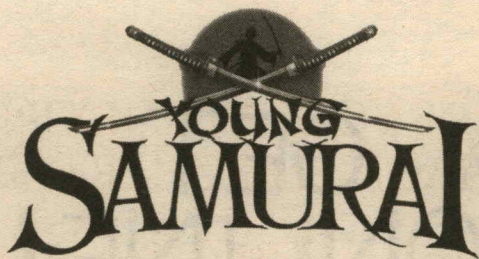
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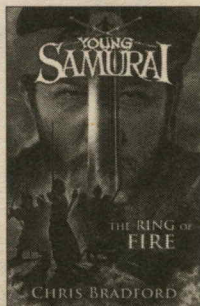
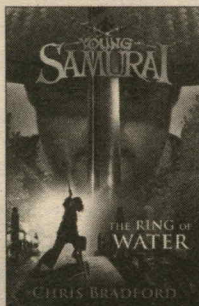
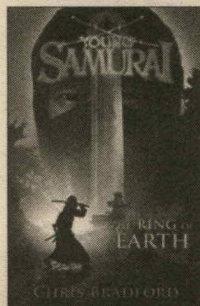
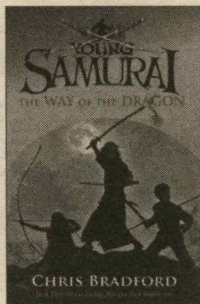
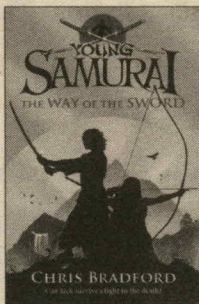
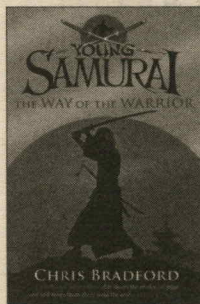


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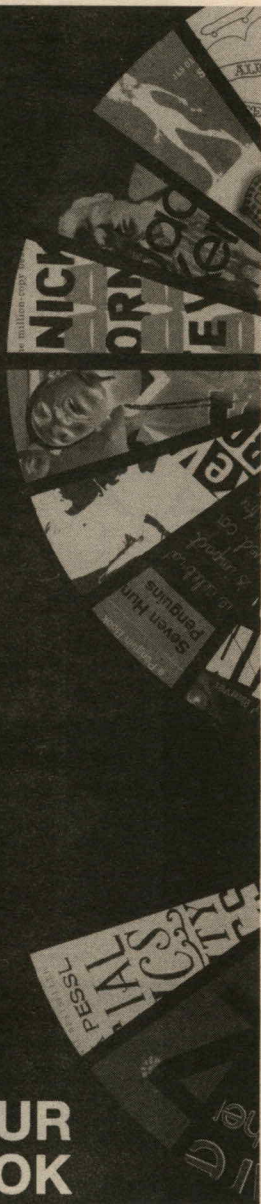
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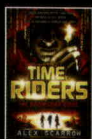
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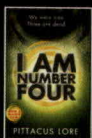
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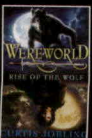
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